
Border Management with Myanmar: A Strategic Imperative

Narender Kumar

Neighbouring states are most relevant in foreign policy¹ and Myanmar, indeed, has strategic, economic, cultural and religious significance for India. Myanmar is not where only China and India ‘meet’; it is also the intersection between South Asia and Southeast Asia². It is a gateway to South Asia and a land bridge to the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is an opportunity and also brings with it a certain amount of vulnerabilities as well. Myanmar has huge potential for meeting India’s energy requirement and for markets for Indian consumer goods; in return, India can contribute immensely in the field of infrastructure development, communication, education, tourism industry, science and technology. India and Myanmar are historically linked to each other through religion, people-to-people contact and sharing ethnically identical populations on both sides of the borders. The porous land borders of India and Myanmar are a cause of concern for peace, stability and economic development. Inhospitable terrain and an underdeveloped border region provide an ideal platform for insurgents, non-state actors, drugs and weapons traffickers to operate and spread their network. To

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a great extent, India has taken control of the grey territories but Myanmar, due to its ethnic contradictions and lack of consensus of all the ethnic groups, to come to the negotiation table has not been able to take control of the turbulent border regions.

India and Myanmar share a long land border of over 1,643 km and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. A large population of Indian origin (according to some estimates, about 2.5 million) lives in Myanmar³. The irony is that, in spite of such

a deep-rooted relationship, dating back to 2000 years, a common myth in both countries continues to be that the other side is the principal source of problems at the border. ⁴It is in the interest of both nations to ensure that undesirable and anti-national elements are not allowed to use the porous border to cause instability on either side. A safe and secure environment is required to integrate the shatter zone to ensure the holistic development and economic empowerment of people. Cooperation and border trade will increase if the borders are stable and secure. Insecurities and apprehensions will be set at rest once the border areas are managed and administered well. Seamless cooperation is essential for effective border management. The border management posture should not be considered in isolation, but should act as a confidence building mechanism and throw up opportunities, greater cooperation and mutual trust between the two nations. In the backdrop of the above, the very essence of border management has to be seen as a positive step to better relations between the two nations.

Considering the limited resources and economic compulsions of Myanmar, it may be sensible to assist and equip the Myanmar Army to handle border management in an institutionalised manner. It is also a good

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idea to make the Myanmar government a stakeholder in border management to protect its national interests. It is equally important that identical tribes on either side of the border do suffer from a feeling of being divided. Traditional land routes and people-to-people interaction must be facilitated rather than hampered by the border management. Before we examine the principles of border management, the regional significance of Myanmar for India needs to be looked at carefully.

Myanmar: A Regional Opportunity for India

“Geographical logic”⁵ suggests that the Indian subcontinent consists of South Asia, and Myanmar is an important constituent of it. Myanmar is an ideal strategic frontier of India, and, hence, needs to be shaped to be favourably disposed towards India. China is applying the economic pull and external manoeuvres to insulate Myanmar from India primarily to ensure resource acquisition. From India’s perspective, Myanmar is an immediate neighbour of vital importance for defence and internal security needs, stability and development in the North-Eastern Region (NER), and expansion of India’s influence in the Bay of Bengal area and Southeast Asia.⁶

Myanmar is where India and China Collide⁷: India is pushing eastward to secure its strategic interests and China is pushing southward as part of its “second ocean strategy.” It means that both powers collide in Myanmar which has become a strategic battleground between India and China.⁸ India must realise that the most direct route to China is through Myanmar, and not through Pakistan or Bangladesh⁹. The race is heating up between India and China to determine which nation will become the primary link to the wider world.¹⁰ The gas pipeline from the

Arakan coast to Kunming and development of the rail and road networks from Sittwe port to Kunming is a race to keep India out of the contention for a larger share of oil, natural gas and precious minerals. India may be a late starter in the race for a larger chunk of natural resources from Myanmar, but it is not out of the race yet. Given the cultural, social and historical linkages with Myanmar, it is unlikely that Myanmar will allow China to engage India through its territory. Here is an opportunity for India to make the 1,643-km-long border a secured flank, but to ensure this, India has to adopt the path of cooperation, not the path of antipathy, with Myanmar.

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Myanmar—the Gateway to ASEAN and South Asia: Myanmar has emerged as a land bridge and gateway to South Asia and the ASEAN nations. India’s Look East Policy will fructify economically and strategically if Myanmar becomes the natural bridge between India and the region *per se*. Without incorporating Myanmar, India cannot truly integrate its economy with the ASEAN and South Asia. In fact, the NER of India will get an economic boost if Myanmar is taken on board to create a safe and secure environment for development.

Chin and Naga Tribes Inhabit Both Sides of the Border: Both India and Myanmar have identical ethnic tribes inhabiting the border regions. They may be part of two separate nations but ethnically and culturally, they continue to be integrated. The sentiments of people regarding the land and tribal loyalties are strong. Tribal nationalism in certain cases is stronger than state nationalism. This is a psychological as well as cultural issue and has to be handled carefully as there are certain minor border adjustments which need to be resolved before the creation of a border fence or delimitation of the disputed areas. The mechanism of a free movement regime has provided the tribes the access, and a tool,

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to intermingle with each other. Therefore, an artificial divide will cause friction among them. The role of border management should be to facilitate rather than become an obstacle for, cultural, religious and social exchange.

Historical Relationship Dating Back to the Spread of Buddhism in the Subcontinent: India is the land of the Buddha and a pilgrimage destination for the majority Buddhists of Myanmar. This has great significance and is a source of bonding between the people of the two nations.

Economic Interdependence of the People: Historically, the people of the border regions have been dependent on each other for barter trade. Salt, cloth, medicines and other consumable items have traditionally been bought from Indian border *haats* or local markets by Myanmarese villagers, whereas fish, agriculture produce and a certain amount of herbs are brought from the other side. This practice had continued unhindered even during the British period. This is a strength as well as an opportunity to maintain the bonding between the people of both nations. The Friendship Road and proposed Asian Highway will further boost economic ties.

Enabling of Myanmar Army a Better Option Than Isolating the Border: As per the Director, Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), India is likely to spend between Rs 6,000 to 10,000 crore annually for maintaining 46 battalions of the Border Security Force (BSF) along the India-Myanmar border¹¹. Wisdom lies in spending less and also making the Myanmar Army a partner in, and accountable for, border management. This can be done by contributing in infrastructure

development for joint/ integrated check posts along the border, provisioning of weapons, vehicles and communications to the Myanmar Army and road connectivity to border outposts. Enabling the Myanmar Army is an economical and more accountable approach than adopting the strategy of isolation. It has been my personal experience that wherever the Myanmar Army was engaged in a positive manner, it responded, and the infiltration and trafficking was arrested to a great extent. It must be understood that the Myanmar Army lacks equipment, vehicles, communications and resources to control the border region. If it is enabled, I am sure the Myanmar Army will deliver. Therefore, to incorporate and engage the Myanmar Army is cost-effective and mutually beneficial rather than isolating and looking inward.

India Needs to Look Deeper into Myanmar Than to Limit the Reach: The problem area is between the Chidwin river and the international border: the grey territories and safe havens are all in this belt. A fence is a retrograde step and will restrict the influence of India up to the fence. Whereas the area of our influence needs to be extended up to the Chidwin river and beyond to deny safe havens to undesirable elements. India should not attempt to either terminate or curtail the free movement regime; rather, it should be used as a leverage to look deeper. This strategy can fructify only if the Myanmar Army is made a stakeholder, and the level of cooperation is increased to that of an equal partner.

Insecurity and Vulnerability from Open Borders

Grey Territories Causing Instability and Insecurity: Porous borders have become a cause of instability and created grey territories due to the inhospitable terrain and lack of government control over remote areas. These areas have become the hub for narcotics production and trade, safe havens for non-state actors to create instability in the northeastern states, a source of illegal arms trafficking and breeding grounds for waging war against the state. Even *jihadi* terrorists are making inroads into India

from Myanmar which, in the near future, cannot be ruled out if the problem in the Rakhine state persists. Such an environment has fostered the subversion of the population and prevented the development and integration of these regions with the state. In fact, the underdeveloped inhospitable geography lends itself to non-state actors to operate with impunity on either side.

Sense of Division of Homeland Between Two Nations: Land borders have divided the Naga and Chin tribes between India and Myanmar. Certain tribes continue to evoke sentiments by suggesting that it was a calibrated move between Myanmar and India to divide them, to weaken their demand for an exclusive homeland of their own. Therefore, the border regime has to accommodate the cultural and social interaction with their kith and kin from across the border.

Cross-Border Unregulated Movement of Criminals and Insurgents: Cross-border movement of insurgents and criminals through the porous border is a cause of serious concern and a source of persistent risk of instability. The existing scenario and arrangements are inadequate to address this problem which is undermining the efforts of both governments in the absence of a resilient border management mechanism. As a result, the area is becoming a hub for drug cartels, arms traffickers and a safe haven for the nexus between inimical forces to destabilise the region. The Indo-Myanmar border leads in arms smuggling, with a total 180 arms seized (35percent) in 4 years.¹² Similarly, close to 50,000 kg of narcotics was recovered from India-Myanmar border during the same period, which is the second highest after the Indo-Nepal border. In addition, trans-national syndicates for organised crimes and secessionist forces such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Nationalist Socialist Council for Nagaland—Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), People's Liberation Army (PLA), United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Kachin National Army are also taking advantage of the porosity of the border to pursue their own agenda.

Minor Unresolved Border Issues:

There are contradictions and differing perceptions with regard to delimitation of the border between the governments and the local border tribes. The Naga and Chin tribes feel that their homeland has been divided by the two nations for their selfish ends. Similarly there are concerns raised by the Meitei and Kuki tribes of Manipur over Kabao Valley. The Nagas claim Greater Nagalim which also consists of two administrative divisions of Myanmar, mainly Kachin state and Sagaing

division. The recent standoff between the Myanmar Army and Assam Rifles over the delimitation of the border near border pillar 76 in Manipur became a source of discomfort between the two nations. The larger issue is that the local tribes are sentimentally attached to the land and the forests. Both governments may not have any problem in making adjustments, but the tribal elders are unlikely to let go their claims over the land which they have been controlling for hundreds of years.

Non-Traditional Threats: Unregulated trans-border movement of people exposes the population to communicable disease such as TB, HIV, bird flu and polio. This has serious implications since control of such diseases is not easy, should they spread to the dense population centres on the Indian side of the border.

Trafficking and Transportation of Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear (CBRN) Weapons: This threat in the near future cannot be discounted and needs to be looked at carefully since there is no mechanism to detect, and prevent, the smuggling of a small quantity of CBRN over a period of time to unleash it at a time and place of choosing. Similarly, destruction of crops by chemical and biological organisms is a possibility to cause a famine-like situation in India.

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The Need of the Hour

The basic principles of efficient border management are:

- **Openness of Borders for Trade and Movement of Persons:** Openness of borders implies free trade and mobility of people as key factors of the border management, with full respect for human rights and freedoms¹³
- **Closing of Borders for all Criminal Activities** and other activities which jeopardise stability in the region. Problems related to smuggling of all kinds, illegal migrations, terrorism, and organised crime must be resolved throughout the region, particularly at the border.¹⁴
- **Seamless Coordination Between Border Management and Border Guarding Force** to provide cooperation and protection of mutual interest. This would assist seamless transfer of information for joint actions on precise intelligence.

Border Management must be a Facilitator

Border management should prevent the trans-border move of criminals/undesirable elements and assist in removing insecurities, facilitate people-to-people contact and enhance the partnership between the two nations in the fields of economy, defence, security, social and culture. Therefore, it must facilitate the following:

- People-to-people contact.
- Border trade.
- Assistance in regulation of inflow and outflow of people.
- Apprehension, and handing over, of terrorists/ insurgents and criminals.
- Cultural exchange, traditional border interactions and visits to religious places.
- Education exchange programme.
- Exchange of intelligence for joint actions against criminals, insurgents and secessionists organisations.

Important Aspects of Border Management

Border management must address the following aspects¹⁵:

- Screening of people for their identity and background.
- Processing of material being transported.
- Processing of validation of travel documents.
- Monitoring of return of people to their homes.
- Prevention of overreaction and overreach of authority to monitor human resources must be respected.
- Religious and cultural traditions must be respected.
- Border management should not become a source of antagonism of the public against government agencies.
- Prevention of corruption at border check posts.
- Early warning and alert system.

Border Management Mechanism

Border Management Force: India faces a predicament of sorts along the India-Myanmar border: prolonged insurgency. In fact, the ideal scenario is to have a unified integrated border management force, including a customs and insurgency grid, as suggested by the US to Mexico.¹⁶ In the author's view, it is not a smart idea to deploy a force which has no knowledge about the geography, cultural and social fabric of the northeast. In fact, "border guarding is not just about placing an ever-increasing quantum of troops on the border. It also relates to capability development to deliver on set parameters so that the envisaged threat is minimised, if not eliminated in its entirety".¹⁷ The idea of handing over of the Myanmar border to the Border Security Force (BSF) lacks "military logic" and those who have the ground knowledge, will see this decision as bad from the operational and strategic points of view. Considering the environmental realities, the following important issues merit consideration:

- **Integrated Command for Counter-Insurgency and Border Management Force:** The problem of insurgency to a great extent

is due to the free movement of men and material from across the porous border and safe havens/ camps in remote border areas. As a result, the most active areas for insurgency are the border areas in Manipur, Nagaland and part of Arunachal. In the backdrop of the above, the Counter-Insurgency (CI) grid and border guarding force cannot be separated in such an environment. More often than not, the insurgents/ terrorists have to be either tracked from across the border or hot pursuit has to be undertaken even across the border as well. As a result, the overall command of the CI grid and border guarding has to be with the same force. Kashmir is a case in point; insurgency has been brought under control in Kashmir by having a single operational command. This has facilitated seamless coordination of operations. It must be understood that in such an insecure environment, a very high degree of coordination is required even between the same forces since there are very high chances of fratricide. Two separate forces with a different ethos and capability will have a huge problem in operating in a seamless manner and will be catastrophic, especially when they are engaged in hot pursuit or operations close to border areas. The idea of multiple agencies operating in the same operational space is strategic bankruptcy.

- **Prevention of Operational Gap:** Two separate forces for the CI grid and border management will create operational gaps. Reactions, passage of information and surgical operations should be seamless, without imposing a time penalty. This can only happen if there is one force and one command for CI and border management. If there are separate forces for border management and the CI grid, more often than not, the border management force will be looking back to secure their lines of communication and logistics rather than focussing on border issues. There will be duplication for Road Opening Parties (ROP), intelligence and the logistic chain.

- **Underdeveloped Terrain Sans Classical Deployment of Exclusive Grids:** The terrain is underdeveloped, with thick, dense forests. Communication arteries are vulnerable and limited. Classical deployment of the border management grid is near impossible till a network of roads is created. Most of the roads are single axial roads. As a consequence, border outposts and CI grid ‘company operating bases’ have to be integrated to support the troops along the border. With the present state of communications, exclusive separate grids for CI and border management comprise a sure recipe for reversals.
- **Highly Skilled Force Required to Deal With CI and Border Management:** The tasks of border management and counter-insurgency operations are overlapping and cannot be classically segregated. The ground situation demands that the border guarding force will be required to undertake counter-infiltration, counter-insurgency and border management operations as well. To undertake such a challenging assignment, the force should be highly skilled to operate in jungles.
- **Social Acceptability and Cultural Knowledge Must for a Border Management Force:** Acceptability of the force amongst the local populace is a big issue with the people of the northeast. They identify themselves with the force which has been operating there for decades. Altering this equation will only cause friction and non-acceptability by the society. In spite of prolonged insurgency, there is rarely a standoff between the people and the force, unlike in Kashmir.
- **Assam Rifles: A Recommended Force:** Assam Rifles has the history and experience of more than 175 years in dealing with counter-insurgency operations in the northeast. Considering the complex nature of the terrain and task, Assam Rifles, indeed, is the best force suitable for this task. Its track record for counter-insurgency, social acceptability and border management has been outstanding. Two separate forces are likely to cause operational ambiguity and will create

operational gaps. The earlier experience of deployment of the BSF in the Samtal area of Manipur had failed and the BSF was unilaterally withdrawn. Finally, the Army and Assam Rifles had to clear the area at much greater cost in terms of human lives.

Road Connectivity: One of the main reasons for the adverse impact of the porosity of the border is the lack of road infrastructure along the border areas. Undesirable elements are thriving in the absence of road connectivity. Reach is reduced by the lack of communication arteries. Thus, for effective monitoring of the border, and laterals along the International Boundary (IB), with axial connectivity to National and State Highways are imperative to ensure speedy movement of reserves and logistics.

Systems Approach to Security: A fence is not a solution to the problem; a fence will be effective only if an adequate force is deployed to guard it. It is only a trip-wire and not an obstacle to prevent infiltration. The fence along Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and Bangladesh has not stopped the drug trafficking or infiltration. It has only altered the method and means to infiltrate. What is needed is a system and not a fence alone. There is no fence along the India-Bhutan border, but there are fewer incidents of border violations. This has been achieved due to military as well as diplomatic synergy and cooperation.

- *Technology a Tool to Empower the Troops on the Ground:* Troops on the ground are required to be empowered technologically to execute their task efficiently. Technology can shrink distances, and make undesirable elements feel insecure in erstwhile safe havens.
- *Communication Grid:* Though the government is making it possible to integrate remote areas with electronic communication, there are operating limitations and the entire border region is yet to be covered by an uninterrupted communication grid. The communication

vacuum also creates an information vacuum. Flow of information has to be swift and secure.

- *Surveillance*: All-weather all-terrain surveillance of border areas is a must for tracking of insurgents/ criminals for rapid response. Human intelligence also becomes ineffective if the reaction is delayed.
- *Night Fighting Capability*: Most of the infiltration bids are made during bad weather or nights. Therefore, night vision devices for surveillance and night fighting are a must.
- *Screening of Vehicles and Personnel*: Electronic screening has become a must for deterring trafficking of drugs, weapons and explosives. Use of technology such as full body scanners is necessary to avoid being rude to people.

Focus on Intelligence Based Operations: It has been seen that the troops deployed behind the fence “guard the fence rather than the border” which is a bad idea to pursue. More often than not, the focus is to ensure no damage to the fence rather than to find out the signatures of the trespassing or look deep inside the grey territories. A fence reduces the interaction, and results in lack of intelligence and situational awareness. In the backdrop of the above, the key to border management lies in intelligence-based operations and not in the bureaucratic approach of emulating the western border measures against a declared adversary.

Creation of Border Haats and Crossing Points

At the moment, there are two operational border trade points, Moreh-Tamu (1995) and Zowkathar-Rhi (2004) and an agreement for the third trade point, Avakhung-Leshi, has been concluded recently.¹⁸ However, the ground situation is that a Free Movement Regime (FMR) is in place, which permits the tribes residing along the border to travel 16 km across the boundary without visa restrictions¹⁹; and they can also engage in barter trade with head loads. This practice has the sanction of

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the governments and tribal elders on either side. Another factor which cannot be discounted is that the dispersion of population in remote areas is such that they have no choice but to be interdependent on each other for daily needs. There are two ways to address this issue: the easiest is to stop the practice altogether, but this will invite resistance from the locals on both sides and may result in smuggling and unfair practices; the second is to regulate it through border outposts, which is more pragmatic and in line with the local traditions. This would require opening of the exchange route and more border *haats*.

Border Personal Meeting Points and Coordination Centres: At present, the border personnel meetings and border coordination points are almost negligible. The entire process is ad hoc in nature. There is no hot line or mechanism to interact at the sector level. However, in such an environment, there is a requirement of regular interaction on a fortnightly bases for coordination and regulation of border crossing/infiltration by the border guarding forces and intelligence agencies on both sides. This would greatly increase interaction as well as give an opportunity to share intelligence.

Conclusion

There is a “crisis of space” and the space cannot be allowed to be misused or abused by non-state actors, who wish to govern the territory without responsibility and accountability. Constitutionally empowered institutions should control the territory and its subjects. If considered necessary, force must be used to bring order and reimpose the will of the state. If the non-state actors and/or extra-constitutional super empowered

individuals or organisations are allowed to continue their activities, they will become lethal and unmanageable at some point in time. Thus, the border management in such an environment has to be resilient and capable of dealing with any eventuality, including use of force.

Myanmar will become a tool to stabilise social and economic disruption in landlocked southern China.

Dealing with such complex situations would need an integrated system. A compartmentalised or fragmented approach would, in turn, help the cause of the abuser of the porous border. A more realistic and pragmatic approach is needed rather than an approach of empire building. A case in point is Kashmir: the government had to hand over the entire Line of Control (LOC) to the Army at the time of the eruption of insurgency in Kashmir, because the tiered approach was favouring the terrorists. Similarly, the CI grid and border management in the northeast cannot be fragmented between two sets of forces which have different operational ethos and capabilities. Insertion of additional Paramilitary Forces (PMF) will prove to be a burden for the already stretched Assam Rifles and Army since the adversary in this case has no defined boundaries for operations. The situation along the Myanmar border is completely different from the conventional border management in the western and northern borders.

Myanmar is more than a place to feel sorry about, but that does not mean that it is not a prized place to be fought over.²⁰ Myanmar will become a tool to stabilise social and economic disruption in landlocked southern China.²¹ Strategic wisdom suggests that competition between India and China will heat up in the subcontinent, but that does not imply that India should surrender its security and economic interests in Myanmar. Therefore, the border management with Myanmar has to be seen in the light of the larger strategic interests of India, rather than merely a problem of policing.

Notes

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